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ABSTRACT

A review of research literature on corporal punishment reveals that the incidence of corporal punishment has increased over the last twenty years and that it is widely used in some local school districts. Because it is limited by ethical problems, research cannot answer many questions about the direct and indirect effects of corporal punishment. The incidence of corporal punishment and the absence of research evidence suggest that the justification for corporal punishment may come from such areas as religious beliefs and court decisions. (Author/DW)

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Research on Corporal Punishment Effectiveness: Contributions and Limitations

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I have tried to organize this paper around several questions. First, since corporal punishment has been debated so often in recent times what do we know about how frequently it is used? Secondly, is the frequency with which it is used diminishing or increasing in our schools? Third, is corporal punishment effective in suppressing or eliminating unwanted behaviors? And, further, is there any empirical support to the idea that such punishment has "negative side-effects" which may provide sufficient reason to curtail its use irregardless of its effectiveness?

It seemed reasonable that research on corporal punishment would, by now, have provided for the necessary evidence from which recommendations for educational practice could be derived. In turn, this research and accompanying recommendations should have strongly influenced the frequency with which physical punishment is used.

Incidence

The use of corporal punishment in schools is nothing new. In fact, many proponents of corporal punishment justify its use because the Bible tells them so. For example, the Book of Proverbs contains the following:

> Proverbs 22:15 "Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of correction shall drive it from him."

Given such ancient and divine justification it is not surprising that physical punishment has been used so often. Kelley (1962) noted that "In Boston in 1850 it took sixty-five beatings a day to keep a school of four hundred going. (p. 384)." Other Boston records in 1889 listed 11,768 cases in which physical

punishment was used on grammar school boys (Shaffer, 1969). Falk (1941) noted that the incidence and severity of corporal punishment had declined considerably in this century. But, it appears that this trend was reversed in the late 1950's (Francis and Hirschberger, 1973). A recent survey shows that corporal punishment was used in 74% of the districts responding. In particular, the Dallas, Texas school districts reported that physical punishment was administered over 2,000 times in an average month for the 1971-1972 school year (Nation's Schools, 1972.)

The above mentioned district also attracted the attention of the American Civil Liberties Union which reported that "Corporal punishment . . . is far from extinct. In a number of places, most egregiously Dallas, the brutalization of children appears to be a part of the core curriculum (Hentoff, 1971, p. 2)". The policy of the Dallas school district was challenged in a court case (Ware vs. Estes, 1971) but the U. S. District Court ruled that existing school policy concerning corporal punishment was <u>not</u> arbitrary, capricious, or unreasonable. This decision was affirmed by the U.S. Court of Appeals and in 1972 the U. S. Supreme Court eventually refused to hear a further appeal.

Thus, it appears that corporal punishment is quite prevalent, supported by religious doctrine and sanctioned by the legal and judicial decisions of our highest courts.

Empirical Studies of Corporal Punishment

Two reviews of the punishment literature have recently appeared. The most recent (Maurer, 1974) contains discussions of the semantics and theory of punishment, argues vehemently against the use of corporal punishment, but does not attempt to exhaustively review empirical research. Johnston (1972) attempts to review the literature but does not particularly address himself to corporal punishment. It is no wonder. The effects of physical punishments

such as spanking or slapping has been investigated only in institutional settings for retarded, autistic, or schizophrenic children and usually as a last resort after other techniques have failed. Further, these "treatments" were used in combination with other techniques thereby confounding the observed effects (Birnbrauer, 1968; Kircher, Pear, and Martin, 1971; Moore and Bailey, 1973). Obviously ethical considerations have prevented extensive and frequent investigations.

Another form of punishment frequently studied is electric shock. Surely it is not possible for most people to administer electric shock and some would question it as a type of corporal punishment. However, the results of most of these studies are quite consistent and they have attempted to examine the side-effects that are so often mentioned when punishment is discussed. Johnston (1972) concludes "There is sufficient evidence to report that response-contingent electric shock properly used is generally a highly effective punishing stimulus; however, social considerations confine its use almost solely to institutional and clinical settings (p. 1038)." One type of behavior eliminated quickly by electric shock is self-injurious behavior (Bucher and Lovaas, 1967; Corte, Wolf, and Locke, 1971; Lovaas and Simmons, 1969; Lovaas, Koegel, Simmons and Long, 1973; Tate and Baroff, 1966). Other behaviors successfully eliminated by shock include writer's cramp (Liversedge and Sylvester, 1960), cigarette smoking (Powell and Azrin, 1968), and stuttering (Berecz, 1973).

In general, empirical research on corporal punishment outside of institutions and clinics is practically non-existent. Generalizing from the studies conducted in special settings with exceptional children to typical classrooms is, of course, precarious at best. But some evidence is better than none and several insights may be gained by examining those studies that specifically gathered data on a topic previously mentioned: side-effects.

Side-effects of Corporal Punishment

It is not uncommon for teachers to receive the following advice, "Do not punish your students. If you do they will quickly learn to dislike you, your subject matter, and school in general." These are examples of the negative, emotional side-effects thought to occur simultaneously with the delivery of punishment. However, the available evidence does not support this view. In fact, several studies have shown that adult-child interactions actually increased following the suppression of dangerous (e.g., climbing or self-destructive) behavior with electric shock (Lovaas and Simmons, 1969; Risley, 1968). Other studies simply report that no side-effects occurred (e.g., Kircher, Pear, and Martin, 1971).

Another problem frequently mentioned as a negative side-effect of corporal punishment is that by your own behavior you may actually be teaching the child agressive-hurtful responses. That is, children will model or imitate those behaviors that you demonstrate in order to resolve their own problems in conflict situations. In support of this argument it is often noted that highly punitive parents produce children who are aggressive and that one characteristic that child-abusers seem to have in common is that they were abused themselves as children (Eron, Walden, and Lefkowitz, 1970).

Each of the above mentioned criticisms associated with the administration of corporal punishment is extremely important. Although the existing evidence does support the notion that emotional side-effects are a problem, the research is sparse and limited to special settings. However, it seems to me that such criticisms were derived from a simplistic view of association learning. On how many occasions must corporal punishment be used before a child will learn to hate his parents or teacher? Are there any other interactions between adult

and child which would overpower these negative emotions? If it were possible to count the number of positive and negative interactions between children and adults we would probably find that positive exchanges far outnumber those which are negative. This would explain why the occasional slap or spanking neither produces the dreaded emotional problems nor a child abuser. I would submit that the latter outcome is not the result of a simple "monkey see, monkey do" type of learning but is rather the result of an environment in which negative interactions outnumber positive interactions. At the very least I would suggest that the probability of extra-punitive adult behavior is dependent upon the ratio of reinforcing to punishing events that occurred throughout child-rearing.

If we are concerned with the negative side-effects of corporal punishment there is at least one other problem that is rarely mentioned. I am referring here to the effects of such punishment on the punisher rather than the child or student. This concern is reflected in the familiar phrase "This is going to hurt me more than you." You will recognize this phrase as one which is occasionally utterred by a parent prior to a spanking. I do not think that such a statement is totally false. My own discussions with parents have revealed that many have guilt feelings after administering corporal punishment even though they use it very rarely. Often these feelings continue after the child is engaged in more acceptable activities and appears to have completely forgotten the episode. To the best of my knowledge there is no systematic research in this area. At best it appears that while an "occasional" spanking does not produce irreversible damage it is difficult to provide guidelines with regard to who should use it, how often, to what degree, and under what conditions.

Conclusion

In summary it appears that:

1) The incidence of corporal punishment has increased in the last 20 years and is widely used in some districts.

2) Research on corporal punishment cannot satisfactorily answer questions about its direct or indirect effects.

3) Due to ethical problems in investigating corporal punishment effects, it is unlikely that research will ever provide satisfactory answers.

4) The frequency with which corporal punishment is used, combined with the absence of research support, suggests that its continued use is justified and protected on other grounds. These include religious beliefs and judicial court decisions.

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